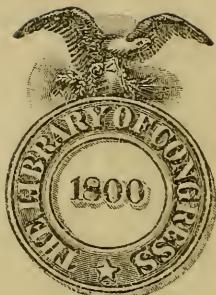


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FROM THEIR GALLERIES



From Their Galleries

by

A. DONALD DOUGLAS

From Their galleries They watch this child's mystery-play we play



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TO GAIL

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PROEM

PROEM

FAIN I would beguile you with a tale of dreams. Fain I would proffer you these dreams for keeping. Within this tale of dreams there dwells the best of me; and there I fain would linger apart from the shamefulness and the little clamoring bigotries of life. They are no more than dreams by the wayside of life; no more than fugitive reprievements from the inexorable passage of time. No more than this, perhaps, yet not unworthy of your listening. For in our dreams lies the whole truth of life, between the times of our eternal sleep. Will you not embark with me upon the stream that flows forever and forever round the turrets of our wakefulness? Only in dreams may we unwind the coil of life that tangles us within our doom. Only in dreams may I give you something finer and truer than the vanity of words. Frail indeed is the wrought casket of dreams that I bring you for taking. Yet if its spun contents beguile you in an idle and charitable hour, it will not have been wrought in vain.

THE MIRROR

THE MIRROR

I sit in a room gray and hoarded with twilight, and in marmoreal silence brood forever. I never laugh. I never cry. I never speak. I watch without pity, or fear, or passion. I watch always. I watch the rich shadows that throng the Mirror. Into the Mirror I gaze. Like scarlet butterflies the shadows gleam across the Mirror. Like scarlet butterflies that die with the sundown. My gaze is unwavering. I am not to be seduced by the fantasitics that so briefly illumine the shallow surface. I am not to be misled by the dazzle of the hurrying figures. Colder and grayer grows the room. I have never smiled. The shadows in the Mirror dance under the press of passion, or faint with desire of love, or wax fierce and cruel in a flourish of swords and a spending of blood. Other and younger shadows shudder fitfully across the Mirror. And I watch always. Always, until the edge of doom. Always, until the eventual dissolution of the Mirror.

THE BAD OLD MAN OF THE WORLD

THE BAD OLD MAN OF THE WORLD

His little pig's eyes glittered like living jade; his great leprous hands twiched in contemptuous convulsions. About his cavernous mouth flickered a smile sinister as a fugitive serpent. He was monstrous and evil and ageless; and he offered me happiness for buying at the price of tears. For all his great bulk I had long known that he was formless and void. Even his most carefully prepared gestures had never appeared to me as anything save tedious and weary affirmations of an hierarchic impressiveness in which himself hardly believed. Indeed I had reason to suspect that these tremendous muscular gyrations were solely intended to dazzle my eyes that I might not see the stars shining through his gluttred body.

In expounding his views upon life he was very earnest about his honesty, and his belief in the general goodness of things. He was especially fond of syllogisms. Perhaps that was his most amiable weakness. From his cleft smile words were continually falling

out and rolling down his paunch like huge painted balloons. On each of these balloons was written a conventional legend of virtue so ingeniously devised that I was almost sorry to impale them on my sword. If only they had not broken so easily! Once broken they melted into thin air. Not one withstood the test of my sword. It seemed too bad, when he was at such constant trouble to send new ones tumbling. He gibbered monstrously down upon me, and even sought to flail me with his enormous hands. In his zeal of conversion he once hurled his gigantical welk upon me. I was not even conscious of his endeavor until afterward he expained to me how hard he had tried. In very pity of him I told him that his syllogisms were all hanky-panky. But he did not seem to understand, and kept on manufacturing balloons with an inveterate and rather disheartening consistency.

THE NARROW HOUSE

THE NARROW HOUSE

BEHIND me clashed to the ivory gate of dreams, and I stood in a dark dazzle of sunshine marbling the ground in lucent mist. From the doorway of a squat house she came to meet me, and ere the door was shut I caught sight of Something fearful and monstrous that lurked like an obscene Spider within the house. Before I could take her in my arms she pointed to the eyeless windows, and with a shuddering admonition laid her finger on her lips. We were ringed about with shifting barricades of purple clouds, and within the house that evil Something brooded and watched through the eyeless windows.

Toward me she came with a delicate and wondrous submission. She was more desirable than ever I had dreamed; and the long agony of my waiting was crushing my heart within narrow bands of iron. Years unending I had stayed her coming, and the discipline of my worship had made me more perfect at this last. If even now this splendorous grail were offered mine

for drinking, it would only be at an untold cost of tears. All the intention of being was wrought into that moment; all the price of my dead unworthiness now was gladly redeemed.

But the clouds rolled between us, and through the vertiginous swirl of mist I could her face only like a flower that floats across still water. And then I knew that the Something monstrous and unclean had come from the house, and even now was fixing Its hairy desecration upon her. In my torture I would have cried, but my tongue clave to my mouth; and in the intolerable silence I could hear the tears of blood that fell within my heart down unplumbed deeps of mortal anguish.

THE DINO SAUR THAT WONDERED WHY

THE DINO SAUR THAT WONDERED WHY

AND then the Dino Saur cranked out from the cave where he had dozed for ever so long, and snapped his scaled eyes at the wintry sun, and gazed.

He was a vasty beast, as great, gray, and awesome as a Gothic church: only he was ugliest, and could move variously on the sea-green ice. For it was the time of First Things, and this round earth was sheeted all over with glaciers of solid sea-green ice. The sun shone in a hard blue sky; but it could not melt the ice. For the ice was much so colder than now, and six suns could not have melted it. And no one wants six suns in the sky: that would be too vulgar much, and Nature is vulgar only never. There were no ice men then, for every one was his own ice man. That is why they talk of the good old days, and nights, which are no more. At least, not now.

And so the Dino Saur gazed, and saw only ice; and he grew lonely, and sobbed. For ice does not make friends with vasty Dino Saurs.

"Bloog!" said the Dino Saur. "I will roam."

And the Dino Saur roamed on the glacial ice, where no grass grew, or birds sang. It was chill as ever so. The Dino Saur's breath blew pluff pluff, and made vapor clouds in the air, like when a steam engine starts, only noisier, and not so pretty nice.

The Dino Saur plumbed hugely as he roamed on the ice, and the ice shook under his vasty tramplings. It was like the trampling of ten armies. But there were no flags, or drums, or jogglety horses: only a mere monster roaming on solid sea-green ice. Why did he roam? Because Dino Saurs always roam, or they die. That is why there are no Dino Saurs now: they all married, and did not roam.

The wind in the time of First Things was sharp, and cut. So the Dino Saur wrapped his scales closerlier about him, and pranced, to warm his blood, and to reach There the sooner. And when he came There, he saw Two who stood upright, and used tooth brushes, because they should.

These Two had but two legs apiece; and the Dino Saur had forty. Think of buttoning twenty pairs of shoes each day, before Mr. Edison had invented the button hook! Let us not wonder if the Dino Saur

was hasty at times. Angels would not button twenty pairs of shoes each day. That is why angels go bare foot. Angels are sly. The Dino Saur was not sly, for he was so very new. Only old persons are sly. So I am told by those who know, or who say they do, which is the same thing, at least in this world.

“Who are you?” asked the Dino Saur, and pointed with twelve of his forty legs at the ugly one of the Two.

Never point with more than ten legs when asking. It is rude, and risky, and overdoes things a bit. That was the way with Dino Saurs. They overdid everything: legs, and questions, and second helpings.

“I am Man,” said the ugly one of the Two; and was proud, though why he should be, I do not know. Neither does he; and still he is proud. Perhaps that is why.

“And who is that?” asked the Dino Saur, and pointed at the pretty one of the Two, this time with twenty of his legs, and a flappy-big ear.

“That is She,” said Man, “and I love Her, and She loves me.”

“Why?” asked the Dino Saur.

“Because I am Man,” said Man, “and She must, or She is not She.”

"Is this true?" asked the Dino Saur, and looked at Her.

"Yes," said She, "it is true."

"But do you want to?" asked the Dino Saur.

"I do not know," She said, because She knew. "I never thought about it."

"She never thinks," said Man. "Only I think. At least I think I think; and that is so."

"Some day She may think," said the Dino Saur.

"I hope not," said Man, "for then She will not love me."

And this is true.

And Man sat on a lump of ice, and said big words about Love and Life and Man; but mostly about Man. And She combed his hair, which was rumpled almost ever, and baked him pan cakes, and mended his eoliths. For She was She, and it always will be so, until She begins to think.

The Dino Saur was big beset, for he could not see Why. And that is why Dino Saurs are not seen now. When some one does not see Why, the world pities him, and sends him off to a cold remote place, and we do not know him again. I know of many Dino Saurs dungeoned in cold remote places, because they could not see Why.

And Man sang of Man, his strength, his love, his life. He sang it so long that at last he thought it must be true. And She smiled, for She knew. And She still smiles, and some times weeps, for She knows, though She never tells.

Man left Her for a day and a night, and hunted foolishly for fuzzy cave bear and woolly rein deer among the glaciers. And he caught fuzzy cave bear and woolly rein deer, and killed them dead. He did not eat them, for he ate only pan cakes, and gum drops, on Sundays, with butter. The fuzzy cave bear and the woolly rein deer had never done him harm, or laughed at his great foolishness. But he was Man; and so he killed them. That was his way of showing his love for Her. And She sat in the cave, and mended his socks, which were red, and baked him pan cakes; and waited long. And of a once Man thought of Her, and came back, and spoke hastily to Her, because there was no butter for the gum drops, such as he loved, and must have. A tear fell from Her eye. But still She loved Man, for She knew, and knows.

And the Dino Saur sat outside the cave, and buttoned his twenty pairs of shoes upside down from worry; and wondered Why.

After a while, when Man in his foolishness was out hunting the fuzzy cave bear and the woolly rein deer, the Dino Saur would sit with Her, and listen when She talked. Man would often talk with Her, but he never listened. But the Dino Saur would listen. He helped Her to darn Man's socks, which were always red, and to make pan cakes, which were never. He could flop forty pan cakes at once with his forty feet.

And so She had little to do, and much time to think. And She too began to wonder Why. But even She will never know Why, because there is no Why.

One day when Man came back to Her, the Dino Saur said simply, "I like Her, and I am going to take Her."

Then Man grew angry, and he cried, "Take her, who loves me, and whom I love? You may not take Her. She is mine forever. She told me so when I asked Her, ever so far ago, and a word may not change. I am Man, and shall not let you take Her. You are not worthy of Her, with your many feet, and your clumsy vasty self."

And that was the first Moral Indignation. Man thought that what he said must be so; or he pretended that it was so, which is the same thing with Man.

The Dino Saur hung his head, with its flappy-big ears, and shifted on his forty feet, and looked at Her.

“Choose!” said the Dino Saur.

“Choose?” said Man. “There can be no choice! What have you to offer Her? Are you fit to care for Her, and to guard Her against the spiteful fuzzy bear and woolly rein deer? I alone understand Her.”

And that was the first Romance, or the first Lie, which is much the same, and every one knows it, though no one will say that he does.

And She looked at Man and chose, as She always will choose, even when She wonders Why. She saw that Man was weak, and could not do without Her. Who would darn his socks, which were red? Who would give him his gum drops, with butter, on Sundays? Who would part his hair, when it was rumpled, as it was always? And so She chose.

“I told you,” said Man, “that I alone understand Her.”

And a second tear fell from Her eye. And then She laughed, for She knew.

But the Dino Saur moved off sadly, and hid in a cavern, and wept largely. And he became a Philosopher, and wrote books that no one will read, because they ask Why.

THE DEVOURER OF THE AGES

THE DEVOURER OF THE AGES

EVEN her very best friends admitted that the Princess was braver than she was beautiful. And since she always grew to be more beautiful the day after to-morrow than she was to-morrow, a public admission of her utter bravery wrought no inconsiderable a stir in the circles of court gossip that eddied round and round the inmost penetralia where resided the Princess and her most royal parents, who, of course, hardly counted. Most visibly her bravery manifested its most audacious infringements upon that court etiquette come down from the gray deluding mists of time. However exemplarily the Princess might conduct her royal highness' self in the mere matter of forks and spoons at the dinner table, and the proper and accredited method of opening eggs laid fresh by the royal and privileged hens, there was no denying that often her vagaries outran the dispositions of the widest tolerance. Not even that high allowance of individual genius bestowed by birth upon the ten thousandth example of the agelong race of royalty could altogether

excuse the remarkable and continued eccentricities of the Princess in the affairs of her nocturnal dispensations.

Among her aunts and uncles, gathered in murky conclave over this latest escapade of their niece, there now rose a grave avuncular anxiety lest the permitted continuance of royal unreserves should endanger the very court etiquette without whose sanction and observance the court life could not long persist. It was all very well for the Princess to prefer Modern Novels to those books which every Princess is constrained by tradition to accept, and by every instinct of her heart to despise. The milk-white heroines therein serving as exemplars of the higher morality of Mr. Alfred Tennyson's time were perhaps just a little dull for a growing girl more interested in her own feminine caprices than in the pathetical history of the Lady of Shalott. And so for once the royal aunts and uncles of the Princess, and her most royal parents who hardly counted at all, were for the once willing that she should proceed with her immodest and unpardonable, but doubtless natural consumption of Modern Novels wherein heroines did not take their own purity quite so seriously as Mr. Alfred Tennyson supposed.

But the Princess' going to bed early, and so missing the court balls simply that she might *dream*, was an affair deserving more than an incidental censure. Not only was it setting a precedent for early retiring, and so reducing the income of the royal electric light companies (Ltd.), but it was undermining the very fabric of royalty. The whole affair might have been praiseworthy enough if the Princess had gone to bed to dream of the Prince who, according to the most reputable tradition, was to emerge one day from the future and claim her as his blushing bride. Since the very first wedding ceremonies of the royal house of Jumjum that had always been the same old business, and for all that they could see it would go on being the same old business until the edge of time. History was always repeating itself, like the king in his public speeches. That seemed the only possible excuse for history.

Until one morning at breakfast the Princess announced the real reason for her premature retirement, the aunts and uncles, and indeed the whole court, who did not know *how* to count, had always imagined that she was simply prolonging the very most founded hierarchies of the royal tradition by dreaming of the

Prince. But one day after eating of a third egg specially laid by the royal and privileged hens for matutinal consumption, she did not scruple to declare that she went to bed early simply that she might dream of a certain—and here she paused with spoon uplifted the better to enforce the horrifical indignation that her announcement would engender—of a certain Crocodile forever pursuing her down the pathway of her most spectacular dreams. With an air of ingenuous confidence the Princess continued her remarks by saying that she hoped the Crocodile would one day catch her, and that is why she should keep on retiring early in order that the anxious Saurian might not think that she was not giving Him a chance, though she hoped that no one would tell Him so. That would set a precedent for courtship which she for one would not shoulder as her responsibility to the coming ages.

For a moment the assembled aunts and uncles and the royal parents, who counted only now and then just to fortify the tradition, were transfixed into a flourish of the most frozen and absolute disbelief. The whole thing was only another childish caprice for which no Princess is to be held accountable. Through the passage of long centuries and the accumulation of

funded superstitions the court world had grown so won to the idea that a Princess, especially when she happens to be a girl, is unanswerable to logic that they preferred the simple method of continuing their ravishment of the royal sideboard of its hams, oatmeals, and muffins, and put aside the Princess' revelation as one of those things one says after a bad night and then as promptly forgets. But for all the fact that she had been brought up to obey her elders out of kindness to their helplessness the Princess was not to be so easily subjected. In one breath she asked for another buttered muffin, and continued to expatiate upon the saurian excellencies and irresistible attributes of that dream Crocodile. In so many dreams, she explained, she had never seen Him, but doubtless He was a splendid Fellow. Rather than allow a tedious summary of reptilean virtues her royal aunts and uncles, and her royal parents, who this time left off counting, put down their spoons and forks and amiability with an air of undoubted vexation and hurled their avuncular and parental thunders upon the head of the Princess.

But she so persisted in her saurian disclosures with the virginal security from the shafts of logic so parcel of the very race of Princesses that her various rela-

tions and her backward parents perceived at last just how they should have to make the best of a bad Princess. With a false assumption of casual unconcern and an aloof We-don't-care-a-dambness they gathered up their royal robes and egg-shells, and departed in very high dudgeon. Outraged royalty never departs in anything less complex than high dudgeon, and they were the last ones to begin a dangerous precedent.

Had the Princess been really more regardful of her supposed tutelary obediences to those older than herself and therefore more qualified to misunderstand things, she might have improved matters very generally by divulging the fact that the Crocodile had eaten up all her other dreams, and that therefore she *couldn't* dream of anything else save that omniverous Saurian. But no Princess trades in the stuff of logical explanations to those less subtle than herself; and so it is always forgiven her, though if a mere Prince took upon himself so baffling an oracular discretion he would have a damp bad time of it. That the Princess did not reveal the authentic reason for her supposed vagaries is, however, a credit rather than a detriment to her intellectual development. Mere testamentary evidence she did not possess; and the court would

have demanded nothing less cogent than testamentary evidence.

That midway of the night as she was clambering with a careless serenity up the blank face of the wall that led to the Crocodile's cavern she chanced to look down in an easy access of courage. Then she wished she hadn't just as you always wish you hadn't when it is too late.

Below her a swirl of mists revolved in tortuous coils over a spectral ocean beating in an uneasy moan of baffled tides upon a wan and glimmering beach. A leaden stretch of cloud filmed the sky; and the air murmured horribly with whisperings of nameless unremembered things and a flurry of blown snowflakes. Over the unfolding crevasses of the waves the foam crept in wounded and faceless convolutions. At the cliff's bottom writhed a darkness absolute. Desperately she clambered for perilous foothold upon this cliff sheer and bland as spun glass. Sinister gusts of fear dimmed in her heart the tall candles of her faith. Her eyes faded with the dread of her endeavor. Wildly she wished that she had not come so far this night toward these forlorn caverns where the Crocodile housed His mystery so awfully. Yet she dared not let

slip her vantage upon the cliff lest she tumble to perdition. If only she had been contented to seek the place of her desiring down those rosebloomed pathways that heretofore had been the voyages of her dream-wanderings! No means had she ever had of guessing that the goal would rest within a voiceless cavern set in the horror of this cliff. It was not for nothing that she had gained her public reputation for bravery. Though no one was looking on, and no one would ever know, she was answerable to the commandments of her heart; and those commandments would never let her relinquish the quest whose ending she must ascertain.

Beneath her striving feet the wall seemed to shimmer down like the overpassed unwindings of a monstrous serpent; and at last her hands clung to a tuft at the cliff's verge. Her hands were bleeding and broken. Her body was scarred and torn with her triumphing agony. Yet she dawdled her feet over the cliff's verge and laughed into the chasms. Her heart resumed again the rhythm of its careless singing, and she smiled a little bitterly to think that dreams could make even a Princess afraid before Crocodiles. Softly she prayed that her soul might ever stay inviolate before

the race of Crocodiles, and the terror that waits upon human dreams.

As she breathed her brave espousals of life there fell upon her cheek the noisome breath of Something immensurate and overreaching in its fear the little tawdry horrors she had overcome. She dared not turn to see what was behind her. She dared not cry out, and so wake safely in her little white bed. Here was the final testing of her courage; here was the ordeal of life itself. Behind her slavered and brooded the very Crocodile of Crocodiles, uprearing His vast bulk flaked with the blood and tears of the generations of Princesses He had devoured through the unnumbered ages. How dreadful and immeasurable of horror He was she scarcely dared imagine. Now at last she knew without questioning that she stood in His presence wherefrom her race of Princesses had been so jealously excluded. The very Crocodile of Crocodiles was waiting for her answer to the challenge of the ages.

Down through a coil of mist she looked to the fierce sea; and on her neck His breath grew hot and foul. It was the Beast of Time who had stayed for her: the Beast who had clawed and soiled the dreams of all the world's Princesses since the crack of the first

dawn. Armed only with the faith of her heart and the brave blue of her eyes should she turn and confront Him? One leap into the gusty air that swirled down upon the sea, and she would land safely in her little white bed where the sun was and the birds sang. One turn of her body and she would confront the Devourer of the Ages, the very Crocodile of Crocodiles. The choice was laid on her. Which way her doom was she could not know. The choice was laid on her, and she had made it: the Devourer of the Ages, or the room where the sun was and the birds sang. She drew to her heart all her spent strength, and—

IT

IT

EVER since that first wind-driven night when she had heard Its low ominous cough just behind the closet door where hung her pinkest party dresses, she had known It as a dreadful familiar. In the spumy dark It was most real to her. But even when clean winds girdled the sunlighted world, and the spring clad fields in an ever sweeter bravery, she knew that It was somewhere close at hand in waiting for that one false step which should prove her doom. The her eyes would grow wide with dreadful fear, and she would run and hide within the curtaining folds of her nurse's flappy skirts.

They could never understand the cause of these swift anguishes, and by all the means in their power they sought to make her tell. That she would never do; and It knew that she would never tell upon It. So they wrote her feeling down to childish caprice, just as they wrote down everything mysterious and shy to childish caprice, and went upon their comfort-

able ways. It was their custom, and they couldn't change it for her inscrutable childishness. Dinner must be on time. Guests could not be kept waiting. And in their favor it must be recorded that she had never told. She kept It to herself; and in her young soul Its cough sounded low and ominous.

With the years she grew to be very lovely, and too big to hide within her nurse's flappy skirts. They were very sure that she was too big to fall into those strange and sudden transfixions of mysterious terror. They were very sure about everything that concerned her. For her caprice they scolded her, and threatened to stop her pocket-money. She tried not to cry; but not to cry out under the torture was a grievous task. If only she could have told about It the torture would have been the easier to bear. And now Its cough was louder and harsher, and within a thick crackle of sound held the menace of a certain doom. It seemed to brood in the corner where the shadows gathered at dusk, and to send out Its doom into her happiest hours. Her eyes were gray and shy, and within their deeps lay an unuttered pain. So sure she was that no one could understand her that she talked always of common matters, and pretended to be interested in their doings.

They were busy and active. So much so that they never guessed how little caught she was into their murmurous disposals. They had never been given to guesswork. Of everything they had always been assured. They had always known all about her and what her soul was thinking, and they never scrupled to tell her their thoughts. What could she do save smile her shy and secret smile, her eyes astare with strained attention lest It should ever come upon her sight, her ears set to catch that low and ominous cough which had sounded within her soul since that first warning from the closet door behind whose barrier hung her pinkest party dresses.

About their tasks they were so busy and happy that they had little occasion to try to probe into her soul, and learn the reason for that wan smile which so belied the laughter in her gray eyes. She was so lovely and wise and young. But to them she would always be the fanciful baby who cried for no reason at all, and hid foolishly in nurse's wide-flapping skirts. And so they went their comfortable ways; and when she did not come or seemed averse they only smiled as who should say: 'Tis only a girl's caprice. Let her stay if she wants. We have other work afield. And off

they would go, shouting and talking all at once; and their words would bumble like industrious bees seeking honey in withered flowers.

As she stood in the doorway and watched them go the light would fade in her young gray eyes and a dreadful terror would film their sweetness. Now Its cough 'came always from the murky stairs that led dimly up to the attic room; and from her place in the slant sunshine she could hear that sound creep slowly down the stairs and pause at the door but thirty paces behind her. Then the cough rattled against the separating door; and she put her hand over her mouth to stay the uttering of her fear. This day the cough was lower and more ominous; and her heart went sick with fright. In the golden distance she could see them at play; and she longed to run and join their careless sport. How happy they were in the sunshine away from the cough behind the separating door! How happy and careless they were in their understanding of her! She ran out through the doorway and flung herself upon the grass and shook with fear. Now Its cough pattered against the window pane, low and ominous and charged with doom. In sudden courage

she looked at the window, just too late to see It shamble from Its post of vengeful observation.

And so with the years she grew even lovelier with her sweet wisdom and youth. Of course they never knew, though in growing numbers they came to petition for her hand. Into each one's eyes she looked long and with an agonized hope. In each one's eyes she found only emptiness. She was sad and sorry, so she said truly, and cried a little when they were not there to see. They were so nice. They were all darlings. And at first they took it so very hard. And then always they went away and found others, and doubtless laughed at their first madness for her and her sweet gray eyes. But their laughter she did not hear. She heard only Its cough, low and ominous, and just at her shoulder.

Under her torture she would have cried; but there was no one to hear or undersand.. With It even she would have pled for pity; but never could she see It, no matter how quickly she turned her head to look. Always It just shambled out of sight. Always It returned and Its cough grew harsher and more certain, there at her shoulder, or by her pillow at night in the great dark.

They petted her, and increased her pocket-money. Told her that she too must join in their zest. She was growing to muse and mope overmuch, they said. She was too fanciful and childish, they exclaimed. They argued that she needed some work, some play, something to take her from herself. She smiled her wan smile; and the light in her fading eyes grew more haggard. They meant so well; and once even she told them. They only told her that she should put It in a book. They could never understand. They would never understand. They were of this world. She did not want to be taken from herself, but from Its cough, low and ominous, there at her shoulder.

Her pillow was stained with her helpless weeping. From Its cough she sought shelter in their company. They wondered why she should so suddenly start and tremble, and why she should so suddenly look over her shoulder, her face gone gray with fear. They said it was nerves, an extended childhood. They counseled doctors. They said that tennis would help. They were so nice and kind, and brought her lemonade. But always at her sudden turning she would see Its shadow flicker dimly from one of the laughing faces, and again Its cough would sound behind her, there at her

shoulder. Not one of them saw the rack upon which she was stretched. Her nights were one long stretch of certain hell. A hell gray and endless. A hell through whose echoing and interminable perspectives rattled a cough, distinct, appalling, and certain in its menace. Nowhere were there eyes sweeter and grayer than hers. But always at her waking they were wet with anguished tears. She was pale and dim. Her low weeping in the night made them afraid. They became anxious, in their kind and useless fashion. They called in expensive and special doctors to talk to her and minister to her. These could do nothing. Them she could not tell. They were of this world. They could not hear Its cough, low and ominous, there at her shoulder.

Always, always, there at her shoulder.

From the first she was sure that he was not like them. It was not that he did not laugh and play and sing. Like them he danced, and was happy. Or appeared to be. She could not be sure. He had only been there for a few days, and yet he seemed to have been there always. He did not try to cheer her, as the others did, nor did he tell her that her eyes were gray and young and wise. At least he did not tell her

so in words. She could not remember that he had passed more than a few words with her. But those words had been strange and terrible. They seemed charged with an accusing knowledge. They were: "Do not turn, *now*. On your life do not turn. If you turn now, you will *see*. You must not see, though for a time you must continue to hear. As you bear me respect for my honor, do not turn. Look into my face. No shadow will rest there."

It was very hard not to turn. Its cough demanded that she turn and see. Its cough was harsh and menacing, and imbued with a dreadful command. A command she would have given almost her life to obey. Its cough now was continuous, and with the hours the command grew harsher and more insistent. It was most difficult at night, when he was not there. At night it seemed as if her life's blood were drained lest she should turn, and *see*, there by her pillow in the great dark.

Yet she did not turn. Even when he was not there she did not turn. And one moonstruck night when no winds blew, and the room was fraught with a desperate horror of command, she could bear the torture no longer, and she turned to *see*. But before she could

turn she knew that he was standing before her in the moonstruck night. He had come in by the window. He came to her bed and took her head in his hands. He sat by her bed, and pillow'd her head upon his bosom. He spoke gravely and quietly that his words might be believed.

"I could not sleep," he said. "I knew that to-night, if ever, you would turn. Since I am come into this place I have not slept. I knew that to-night, if ever, you would turn, and *see*. So I came."

When his voice had ceased she heard Its cough, harsh and insistent, there by her shoulder, by his bosom as he held her.

"Do you not hear It?" she said wildly, and her body trembled so that almost it escaped his holding.

"Do you not hear It?" she shrilled like one mad, and her eyes were wan and blood-filled. "Always, always, I have heard It; and always they have never understood. You, you only seem to understand. Surely you must hear It; surely you too must obey."

But still he sat grave and immobile, and held her within his arms.

"I have not heard It," he said. "I alone understand; but I have not heard It. Of me even It is afraid. And

after this night you too shall never hear Its cough. This night you were very near your doom; and had I not known I should have come in ill time. After this night I shall never leave you. Always the moon and the sun shall find us together. Always until the close of the last dusk."

As she lay upon his bosom in the moonstruck room she still trembled and shrank awfully from Its cough, low and ominous, even there by her shoulder, on his bosom. And she knew that now she should never turn, and *see*. Not even Its shadow, gray and shambling, upon their faces and upon his face that guarded her.

About them in the palsied room the shadows crept and departed with the haggard moon, and at last were winnowed by the scarlet dawn. And in that hour of new life he gathered her stricken face into his arms, and his tears fell upon her heart.

THE MAIN

THE MAIN

“Let the great river take me to the main”

BEHIND the murmurous clinkle of tea-cups her soul builded itself a dark curtain of silence. Here it was very dim and gray; and here her soul sang a furtive melodious psalmody. Somewhere outside her rampart they were talking very fast and very loud. They were very sure that they were going to *do* something about it all. What, they were not certain; but something immediate and real. Something earnest and active. How strange it was to sit in the gathered gloom, and hear their voices bumble drowsily without like strayed insects set upon unimagined industries. They always came to conclusions. Then they would come shouting and crowding in upon her; and behind her young smile she would sit and watch. She could only see neck-ties and shoes, trim, shiny shoes, and hear insistent voices. There must be no delay! Things were pressing. A moment more, and it might be too late. Weren't things—*immediate*.

She heard her voice reply that things were very lovely. Very lovely indeed. It must be her voice: at the time no one else was speaking. Not one of them was speaking! It might be they were waiting for her to speak. At times they did. They looked like people waiting for obedient echoes. At rebound from her young lips their words sounded the more resonant. They seemed to be waiting for her to say that something, *anything* must be done, now, at once.

Here in this gray twilight country her soul went singing. Beloved, wordless songs that were her very own. Songs no one had taught her. They were always trying to teach her; they never had taught her songs. Here things *were* lovely. Perspectives, scarlet and gray perspectives, down which her soul went singing. This time her soul was singing an elegy. It was mournful, but very pleasant, here in these unfolding glooms. Endless and interminable perspectives they were, with never a hint at an impending close. Just beyond might lie sunlighted valleys, austere mountains, generous uplands, august rivers broad and deep. She was sure that there must be rivers. On them she would go sailing. Down them to the main, the great main, the main of her eventual seeking.

Again they came crowding in upon her, and demanded that she furnish pleasant and sentimental echoes from her young lips. Clothed in her delicate accents their words seemed really touched with heroic sublimity. Clothed in glamour. No longer drab and scolding, no longer fussy and dingy. Like swooping owls in the haunted dusk their words plucked at her. Then they were silent, waiting her reply.

Down the dark river her soul went singing its delectable elegy. Down the river broad and deep, toward the main, the great main of her eventual discovery. How much narrower than before its channel was; how dark and restless the current! Mists, gray and scarlet, shimmered over the turbid surface. Behind their curtaining lay in wait the main. Over its deeps the winds might hurry and chastise, the waves engulf, the clouds brood. Yet it was the main, *her* main, her very own for keeping!

Down the dark river her soul went singing. The main lay, it *must* lie, just beyond the further bend. There at the bend hovered sea-gulls, scarlet and gray and mysterious. Her elegy swelled to a pæan. Her elegy gathered to its singing the greatness of her discovery.

But they came crowding in upon her. The murmurous clinkle of tea-cups no longer sheltered her. It was time to go. Time to have her voice send correct sentiments, dutiful appreciations from young lips.

Why had they come then, *then*? Her soul had been singing on the edge of discovery, at the dark river's final bend, on the verge of the steep and irretrievable cliffway that guarded the main, the great main of her eventual discovery. They had crowded in upon her; they had taken her main away from her. They had no right, no right!

At the door her voice sent correct sentiments, dutiful appreciations from young lips. Behind it all her soul mourned, and would not be comforted. It was not fair, not just! They had taken the main, *her* main, the great main of her delectable discovery.

THE SONG OF SONGS

THE SONG OF SONGS

A SECRET bird's sudden caroling close at hand made him pause to hearken from the dim and perilous recesses of his sleep-walking, and he opened his eyes in the great dawn. He stood just at the cliff's edge. Another step would have cast him into the void. The mists of night were being splintered with the spears of dawn. Below him a leadened sea broke on spiny rocks and yellow sand. Into the creeping waters delved sea-birds with spent wings. The ledge whereon he stood was girt with pines in whose mysterious deeps the light was swallowed by perdurable darkness. From those deeps had come the secret bird's sudden caroling. Through those deeps he had passed in his sleep-walking ere he emerged into the great dawn. This gush of fierce light incarnadined the world. The sea's gray was patched with crimson, and the rocks glinted like a crouched dragon's burnished scales. There at the cliff's edge he hid his face in his hands, and wept pitifully.

These many years he had wept for the whole world's wrong. Now he was weeping in very pity of his soul. Among men he might come and go with careless jesting and unconsidered laughter. Here the burden of life lay heavy upon his soul and wrung tearless weeping from his very heart. The world was old and evil in sin. Behind the world's antic of fools lay in wait the heart of things, cold, tearless, implacable. Among the sweaty crowds of men he laughed with the rest at the sorry destiny earth's children played under the unhurrying sun. Here his hope had left him with the night, and even in the great dawn he saw only a rue of blood.

Scarlet light flooded the reluctant tides, and engulfed all darkness save only those mysterious deeps of the pine forest whence first had come the secret bird's sudden caroling. The yellow sands devoured the eager light, and the sea's eye turned a lustering green with prisoned radiancy. Little wandering clouds flecked the edge of the world like curious truant night-birds conjured from those stretches of unconquerable darkness that lie beyond the sky's verge. Into the vault of the heavens the sun ascended ever higher and flung his slant spears into the mysterious deeps of the

pine forest. Freshets of hurrying winds blew coldly down upon the green sea and the yellow sands. Yet no sound came from the dark forest since the secret bird's first caroling in the great dawn.

He lifted his anguished face from his hands, and turned unsteadily toward the pines. Of his most secret sorrow he too had made a little song, and had sung it in the market-place where men came to buy and sell their immortal souls. For a trifle the world had bought his song, and had called him a dealer in words. His fees to the world had been paid in blood, and they had dared to call him a dealer in words! Yet in his heart he could find no cause to blame them. So very many were dealers in words, and purveyors to the groundlings of the soul's most resolute, most consecrate emotion. To the world he was one other of those gaudy clowns and chattering knaves coining the heart's shy singing into base metal. His song he had bartered for alloy. His words he had let slip into the stinking winds of the market-place. Then had come upon him a horror of clattering fanfare and the throaty voices of men, and he had fled to his little house near the green sea that he might forget the song which he had sung.

Here to the cliff's edge in a thraldom of sleep-walking he had wandered ere he was awakened by the secret bird's sudden caroling. Into the night and forest paths he had strayed, and save for that sudden caroling he had fallen on the far rocks and yellow sand.

In his bitterness of vain years he would have prayed that he might have been released from the pain of life, and that the bird had not dared to carol in the great dawn. In his grievous crying out at the wrong of things he would not have refused even the last renunciation. His little song he had sung in the garish market-places of the world. He had been little better than a fool juggling with gilded phrases before a clamorous and joyless populace. Posturing knaves and wordy clowns might still shout their travesties of noble love and display their festering conceits before ravening crowds of purchasers. His soul's most resolute, most consecrate emotion he would make dedicate only to that inscrutable and desirous hope from whose most secret sorrow he had fashioned his little song.

Everywhere about him lay golden and gathering sunlight and the stir of an awakened and triumphant earth. Everywhere the sunlight glistened, save in those mysterious deeps of the dark forest. And suddenly

there broke again upon his hearing the secret bird's sudden caroling. Then it had given him pause at the cliff's fateful edge. Now it commanded him, it sang of strange and shy and lovely reassurances, of secret hopes that he had hardly dared to dream, there in the mysterious deeps of the dark forest. Its singing may have been involuntary and undeliberate; but of its undying sweetness he could never doubt in a world of vain appearances and fabulous delusions. With a gesture of infinite inclusion, and the long despair of years forever stilled within his heart, he turned and stumbled blindly toward the secret bird's mysterious caroling.

THEIR PLAY

THEIR PLAY

THE scarlet poppies of sundown yet gleamed across the mown fields of darkness before Their laughter died out along the fading edge of the world. They had come down from those Uplands girled with the gray mists of old Night, and had played a new play such as They had never played since They were grown wearied of playing nine-pins with a scud of hurrying stars amid vasty abyssms of space. At the daybreak of Time They had adventured to the world of Man in the hope that They might gather new tales for telling when once more They should speed with rich laughter the million million untroubled years that span the birth and death of new worlds. Their new play had been a good play, and They were now returning to Their Uplands in the full mood of an uproarious laughter that beat upon the ramparts upheld by the twain poles and swept by the gusts of the everlasting winds. From the unplumbed vault of the heavens echoed Their laughter: from the bottomless deeps of

the southern hemispheres. Never had Their mirth so buffeted against the wall of things, or so lingered in the twilight.

But had They not cause for careless laughter? Had They not played a good play with human souls?

On a high hill set above valleys where the sunshine dwelled lovingly on the formidable work of the Seven Days They found Man brooding on the exceeding greatness of his possessions. For long Man had dreamed upon the new-born world spread like a plaything at his triumphing feet. The wine-dark sea that foamed its tempesting surf upon the stretch of sand was his for the asking. His were the green forests along the ridge of the eternal hills; and to his harvesting would come the rich spoil of the meadow lands. As yet no heat and dust of the tortuous years, or any winnowing of human tears and blood had overlaid the first fruits of the Maker. The daysong of the young morning stars came faint and pure across the wine-dark sea, and birds sang on the autumnal hills. Not yet was Man the prisoner of life.

They had found Man on the high hill and had whispered Their counsels into his soul; and had crowded into the front rows of Their galleries for

what They knew would come. There is no withstanding Their humor; and Man had risen from his idle innocence, and done Things. And those Things he has perpetuated until they have been wrought into the purpose and intention of being, and from their legacy there is no withstanding while Man's time shall endure. Man had gone down into the golden valleys, and had sharpened him a stone, and had flung it at the silent shy creatures who had never done him harm; and that was Man's first play. Man had gone into the murmurous caverns of the green hills, and in the dirt and muck and slime had digged him gold from the stored veins therein. When Man had played his second play he flung across his shoulders the poor broken bodies of the silent shy creatures who had never done him harm, and bound his brow with a narrow crown of gold, and had gone to tell Her of his plays that were so good plays.

She had not seemed to care for his plays, and had not tried to understand and had gone out and looked at the stars. Man had thought that a foolish play, and had told Her so. Again She did not seem to care, or try to understand; and had wandered singing among the blood-dark lilies that crimsoned the river's marge.

Her caprice for childish plays Man could never understand ; and had given up trying to understand why Her eyes should fill with tears at the sudden beauty of wayside flowers, and why She should comb her hair by the water's edge at dawn, and why She should dance foolishly and childishly across the floor of their dwelling cave when She might be piercing with blades the hearts of the woodland creatures, or delving murkily into the dim earth. But They knew why She did these things ; and that gave new zest to Their play.

Man grew wearied of his plays ; and he prayed for a grand play that should be the very Play of plays, and should make Her understand. They whispered Their counsels into his soul ; and his soul hearkened as They knew it would.

“Let me play a play so big that She will understand,” prayed Man.

And They hearkened to his prayers, as They always do, and bade gray Death come to Man in the guise of Fame, and play with Man for Her soul that She might understand. And in his pride Man played with gray Death in the guise of Fame for Her soul, as he always does, and in his pride and the flush of his soul he played carelessly, and Death won.

“You have won,” cried Man in the first easy shame of defeat.

“I always win,” answered Death wearily.

“Who are you but Fame?” cried Man. “I care nothing for Fame; I am willing to lose Fame if only She will understand my play.”

“She will understand your play,” answered Death. “For I am Death.”

Then Man’s soul knew the black traitorous play that he had played. For he had played for another’s soul, and without that other’s knowledge, and that other was She.

“Death, Death, give Her back to me!” Man cried in an agony of repentance.

“I have given Her back to you,” said Death. “All things come back to you in Me.”

“You have cheated,” cried Man.

“You played with Me knowing I was Fame,” answered Death. “Now you must tell Her, and She will understand.”

And They laughed long and loud: all the time They had understood.

In his blind grief of tears Man told Her that he had played for Her soul with Death, and that he had

lost. She lay like a pale flower on Her couch, and Her eyes were dim with faint stars.

“Have I not known, O Heart of Mine?” She said. “Have you not played for my soul since the beginning; and always, always I have understood, since the beginnings of things, since your first play.”

Man looked at Her with tired eyes.

“It has been a jest with me,” he said. “The jest is outworn.”

“My play was foolish and childish,” She said, “and yet with me it has never been a jest.”

“I could not know,” said Man dully, and his heart was broken with shame.

“You could never know,” She said, and Her mouth was wan with piteous betrayal.

“I am come into the dusk of things,” said Man. “All birds are flown; darkness is on my soul; I shall not laugh again.”

“I shall always laugh,” She said. “Even before dawn, at the darkest hour, even then I shall laugh.”

For a moment They were troubled, and held in Their laughter until Man should speak. Even They do not always laugh.

"I can not laugh," said Man. "Laughter and tears I have never understood."

"Have I not known?" She said. "O Heart of Mine, have I not known, even when you lay upon my heart, knowing not, caring not, understanding nothing? Shall I fear the greater darkness now?"

Man bowed his head upon Her breast. In Her eyes the stars shone more faintly, and Her words lingered upon the air like thistledown caught from the wind.

"Can you forgive?" said Man.

"I have never done otherwise," She said. "I could not deny you now."

"The sin is mine," said Man. "My own plays are as nothing to the sin I have sinned with your soul. I can not face the stars again."

"There is no sin," She said. "There is only compassion."

Again They forbore to laugh, not understanding Her words.

"Would I had played for my soul!" cried Man. "Not yours, not yours!"

"Had you not already played and lost with yours?" She said. "And shall we not face the long night together?"

But Man could not speak; and in his arms She grew ever paler. In Her eyes the stars were paling one by one into a black pall of unending darkness.

“Death lied,” murmured Man. “He said that you would understand; and always you have understood.”

“And now your understanding is mine,” She said.

“I have given you only sorrow, not knowing,” said Man. “In my unclean pride I have taken all the joy.”

“With me joy and sorrow have been one,” She said. “That is the great gift They have given me; and even They can not take it from me.”

“Laughter and tears have been one,” She said.

And then in his blackest grief of all Man knew that he had never understood, and could never understand. But that grief he did not tell Her, knowing She already knew.

“It is better so,” She said. “Amid the stars it is very lonely; but always I shall wait your coming. O Heart of Mine, let the night take me; let me be gathered to the eternal darkness.”

In blind grief Man rose from Her body and went out into the night, and in his soul he cursed Them for the cowards that They are; and his soul was wind-swept with Their laughter. And Their laughter

shrilled across the edge of the worlds and echoed horribly among the empty spaces and the bottomless pits of the heavens. Among the stars only there was silence. Only among the stars.

But had They not cause for careless laughter? Had They not played a good play with two human Souls?

COR CORDIUM

COR CORDIUM

WHEN this long day had fallen to its wearied close, and the night with her sky of immemorial stars and her great darkness had covered over the garish eye of the sun, I sought my house of dreams builded within the deeper darkness of my most secret hope. Into mine own heart's country I passed through tortuous upwinding dream corridors that led by misted rooms endlessly; and from the very stuff of human dreams I wrought this record of my journeying. Will you not hearken to my song, O Heart of Mine, lest I die upon the wayside of forgotten dreams that are as little pleading children beating their frail impotency against the grievous shut gates of life? Hearken to my song, O Heart of Mine, and grant me your forgiveness if only that I have too long brooded by the great stream of human tears that flows forever silently through the dusk of the world . . .

Amid the dust and heat and flatulence of things I had journeyed these many years toward the eventual

harbourage of my seeking, and at last I had come to the dark forest that lies on the further side of dreams wrought from the web spun by the great inscrutable Spinner. Here at the utter edge I paused, and would fain have lingered upon the fair and comfortable roadway of the middle course. Yet in despite of the iniquitous allurements of the world I turned my back upon those fabrications so dear to the gross and cloudy eye, and plunged into the dark forest of my hope's most fevered imaginings. From impassable obscuraments and thicketed outplaces I was girdled deeper and deeper until I came to the center of life's maze in that forest of mine own creating where the curtaining trees hoarded the trancèd gloom, and the stars were groping rushlights set far above a silence terrible. No sound broke across the endless march of trees. No wind stirred; all birds were fled. It was the death of time.

A first flutter of snow came down upon the murk of darkness. A cold wind that seemed risen from the bottomless dungeons of hell outpoured its black abyssm upon my fainting soul. In the madness of my fear I would have turned and entered anew that world where love and kindliness shutter in the common

human affections. Yet by my heart I was constrained to leave that profitable world behind, and plunge more bravely still into the press of the immensities. I was caught within toils of mine own making, and would not fly the doom that had lain too close to my lonely heart through the unraveling of the laborious years. And so beneath the menace of the skies and the unremitting snow I struggled ever onward to the far place of my seeking.

Suddenly through the glimmering perspectives of the dark forest floated down upon my passion that form my soul had shaped to its own enfolding, and I knew for mine own that hope from whose pain there is no respite to the poor heart this side of the grave. At the terror and wonderment of that rose-dark loneliness I fell pitifully upon the forest floor in a swoon, murmuring brokenly, "Lo, have I found you, Beloved of my dreams?"

When I had risen from the toppling chasms of my weakness my head was held within the compass of your protective arms, and you were saying,

"Why are you here, stranger to my senses? None venture into the dark forest but die from very heart-

break. Return to the world ere the gates close upon your madness."

In despite of my sweet resting-place I slipped the chains of hallucination, and cried faintly, "It is you who have made this dark forest to be filled with light, and this poor heart of mine to break with happiness. I have found you. Yet you are the renewal of my pain."

"Your pain?" you whispered, and your eyes grew dark with wonder.

"The pain of dreams," I said; "the pain dwelling within those dull depths on the further side of human grief."

"I do not understand," you said.

"My pain is older than the daybreak of the world," I cried, "and all the crimson sundowns of time are stained awfully with its blood. Mine is the pain bound within the narrow house of life that would give its last moment of anguish if only to keep alive your perilous beauty."

"You are mad," you said, "mad with the cold and the loneliness of these woods."

"All the world has named me mad since man first dealed in profitable facts," I cried. "The world has

always broken dreams upon its iron wheels. And now you come into my life, and say you do not understand! Yet you are mine, forever mine, for I have given you birth in this heart and shaped you to my dearest need. Wherever and whenever I find you I shall know you for mine own!"

With wonder and fear your eyes grew ever darker; but behind the curtain of their doubt I saw the fires of comprehension creep new-born into life.

"Are you too my heart's dream as you say that I am yours?" you asked.

"In the world of men I have not known you," I said. "Only in my dreams I have known you. Only in those secret gardens forgotten of the sun, where no birds sing, and bees murmur drowsily beside a purple twilit sea. There from my blood I have fashioned you to be the consecrate rose of desire; there you shall grow until I find you!"

"How shall I know you when you come?" you asked wistfully, and in your eyes the fires of comprehension grew ever stronger, and you spoke with gathering anguish. "How shall I know that far day of first meeting?"

"You may not know," I said, "for I am not yet

parcel of your dreams as you have been of mine. I may come to you with my eyes dark with pain, and the seal of all the world's sorrow on my brow. I may come to you like a thief in the night, blindly seeking atonement on your breast. No, you will not know! But if one day you should wear the form of flesh in the daylight world wherein my hours are spended, I shall never dream to pass you by. Though you are sunk deep in the mud and filth of life, and your loneliness is trampled under by the feet of the base world, I shall never fear to descend to you: I shall pluck you, and wear you, an imperishable flower, on my heart!"

At my words and the passion of my pleading, doubt fell from you like a garment overworn, and I took you in my arms against the intolerable burden of life.

"Your heart and mine, yours only," I whispered. "Our souls are met upon our lips. Your lips hold the secret of my being; your lips are red with my life's blood."

"My life's blood too," you said.

"We are past all harm!" I cried. "Here the world can never bring its teachery."

Upon the heroism of my words, desperate and

forlorn, there broke across the night the sound of wolves, and the dreadful patter of feet came with a hideous and wuthering insistence. Nearer and nearer wailed the desolate chorus; and you drooped faint and white in my arms, and we sank to the ground in a last bitter appeasement of kisses.

“It is the wolves,” you sobbed; “and I shall never know!”

“It is the wolves!” I cried in rage against that swelling and immutable cry of triumph. “It is the wolves of the world!”

“Death is sweeter so,” you murmured.

“The soul of dreams is deathless,” I cried, as the patter of hurrying feet fled over the underbrush, and the sound of the wolves rose to an universal desecration.

“The soul of dreams can not die,” I said, “though all the wolves of the world hunt it to its doom.”

“For me it is death,” you sobbed, “for me it is death. See where their eyes gleam in the curtain of the trees!”

As the wolves broke from the fringe of the far trees and made hideously upon us, I took you in my arms, and cried in the mastery of fate,

“Let come the wolves of the world, the gray ghosts

of despair and hate and fame and lust that have plucked evilly at this ill-starred race of man since this world's making! Yet mine own shall come 'to me. Not all the faltered constructions of circumstance and time shall prevail against its coming!"

But you were faint and pale in my arms, and the wolves were ringed about us in a sudden bodeful hush of victory, and in that pause of death I could hear the snow that falls forever and forever through dreary and illimitable spaces of circumstance and time, unrelenting and unhurrying, upon the measureless, forgotten graves of unnumbered human dreams . . .

AT THE LAST

AT THE LAST

AND in my dream I dreamed that I had been gathered to the dust these many years, and that I was brought to judgment before Them in Their supernal galleries. A thousand eternities or so They kept me waiting while They debated the shocking case of a woman who had run away from her husband because he was ambitious for her soul. Her crime was that she had loved him too greatly. That feminine vagary could hardly be forgiven her. But at last in a discourse freighted with stupendous laughter one of Them pointed out that the husband could hardly have had a sense of humor. At once Their pendulum of decision swung on a backward cycle. Him They condemned to pass eternity with professors; her They admitted to the company of the immortals. In defence of his conduct the husband pled rather desperately that he had always supported morality and the venerable institutions. Vast and inextinguishable laughter whelmed his reproaches. Between breaths of gigantic breath-taking

They informed him that women had never been one of the venerable institutions. He answered that the world had always considered her so; but They simply went on laughing. And from Their judgment there is no appeal.

Their procedure on earth had always impressed me as rather capricious, and so I was not surprised at Their absence of legal formalities and Their unending fund of laughter. When They had done with laughing at the virtuous husband They turned upon me Their superlative condescension. I suppose They expected me to unlock the floodgates of a torrential eloquence. But I said nothing, and only clutched the more tightly the frail and many-colored bubble of dreams in my hand. In impressive omnipotence They viewed me; but still I said nothing, and smiled rather sadly. Their makebelieve of seriousness hardly became Them.

“What is your defence?” They asked, striving to muffle Their laughter in Their beards.

“I have no defence,” I answered.

“What reward do you ask then?” They said.

“I ask no reward,” I answered.

“Then why are you here?” They questioned in wonder.

"To demand my right of You," I answered. "One thing only I ask of You, and that is my right. For I would sleep. Yea, I would sleep a million million years."

They broke into laughter tumultuous and cumulative. Indeed They were easily amused.

"And that is all you ask?" They questioned.

"There is no more blessed portion under the sun than sleep," I said. "But You do not seem to understand. I do not ask it: I demand it. Even You can not take it from me. It is my right!"

At my presumption of authority They seemed disturbed, and forebore to laugh.

"By what heroic life, by what bitter sacrifices do you demand sleep as your portion?" They questioned.

"By nothing save this only," I answered, and I held up to view my frail many-colored bubble of dreams.

Under eyebrows craggy and enormous as the eternal hills They gloomed upon me.

"It is only a toy," They said.

"It is wrought of human tears," I said. "By the tears of things, the tears I have shed for my fellow men."

"We do not understand," They said. "The word tears we do not know. There is only laughter."

"Tears You have never understood," I answered.

"Tears are the birthright of humanity; and these tears of mine I have gathered for keeping against the time of my eventual rest. In the shadows of the world I have gathered them; in the last heartbreak of life I have fashioned them into a frail bubble of dreams. They are mine, mine only; and by their valiancy I ask my portion of eternal sleep. That right You are not to deny. Against that right Your laughter is powerless."

They huddled uneasily together, and upon Their lips died a spectral laughter.

"At the last you must come to me for judgment," I said in my uttermost pride. "I am only a dreamer who has done nothing save understand, and felt nothing save compassion. I am only a dreamer, one of a thousand such whom the world has stretched upon its grievous rack. In my hand I carry only this frail bubble of dreams; and by them alone I shall win eternal sleep. But at the last You must come to me and mine for judgment; and by the tears of things shall You be judged!"

And in my dream I dreamed that They faded into a dim and nebulous unrest, and I might sleep a million million unremembered years under the mortuary and indifferent sun.

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